

Camden Introduces \$164M Budget

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The city council on Friday introduced the city's budget on time and in order -- a feat that hasn't been accomplished in at least 13 years and quite possibly longer.

"I can't find out when the last time was," said Theodore Z. Davis, the city's chief operating officer. "It could have been decades."

"It's something we can point to and say we could do it and we did do it," Davis said of the timely introduction.

The proposed budget for fiscal year 2007-08 is \$164 million, which is about \$5 million more than last year's spending plan, said Richard Wright, the city's outgoing finance director and chief financial officer.

Increased costs in three major areas contributed to Camden's higher budget.

The city's state pension contribution jumped by more than \$4 million, employee salaries rose by \$3.5 million and health benefit costs swelled by around \$2 million, said Wright, who resigned to direct finances for Middletown Township in Monmouth County. Friday was his last day.

Only \$20.2 million of the budget will come from city property taxpayers, who won't see an increase in the local purpose tax rate.

As a result, the proposed budget is dependent on Camden getting \$123.3 million in state aid. That's \$18.2 million more than the \$105 million in aid the city received last year. The city also receives funds from grants and federal aid.

"I might even demand more than that," Davis said.

The city is seeking more state aid because it's facing a double whammy this fiscal year. Several one-time revenue items received last year didn't carry over to this year and the city also has to pay for costs that were deferred from last year, Wright said.

The question remains: will Camden get the aid it wants so it can actually adopt its spending plan?

The state isn't saying yet.

"We have yet to see Camden's introduced budget so we cannot comment," said Chris Donnelly, spokesman for the state Department of Community Affairs, which reviews, approves and distributes much of the state aid packages.

Davis, however, believes a budget introduced by the deadline can only help the city's chances.

"It sends a message to the entire state of New Jersey that the city of Camden can do that which is legislatively required of it and do it in a timely and professional manner," said Davis, who thanked the city's finance department for working hard to meet the goal.

"If we do our things right, than we put ourselves in a better position," he said.

Also, the state now has an actual budget document it can review to see how the money would be spent, which will help in discussions on funding, said Council President Angel Fuentes.

In the 13 years he's served on city council, Camden had never before introduced a budget on time, Fuentes said. Indeed, in the last four years, the city adopted its budget on June 30, the last day of the fiscal year, essentially operating the entire year without a spending plan.

This year the city council is scheduled to vote on the budget Sept. 20.

"A budget that is adopted after the money is spent is no plan. That is why we need timely state action," said Mayor Gwendolyn Faison. "We all know that the state has its budgetary problems. . . . However, we all must remember that Camden is different than any other municipality in the state."

The state took control of Camden's government and school board in 2002 in an effort to turn around the foundering city. The state Legislature in June approved continuing the state takeover for another five years.

"We were told, 'Surrender your right to local self-government and the state will provide the resources necessary to get you beyond a year-to-year subsistence,'" Faison said. "Just as the state holds us accountable for every nickel we spend on public services, we, too, must hold the state accountable to fulfill its promise."